

Exploring the “Edge of Reality”: the International in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1993) follows Azaro, an *abiku* child, and his family through life in an impoverished neighborhood in what can be assumed to be Lagos, Nigeria, just before the advent of Nigerian independence. Okri says "[A] true invasion takes place not when a society has been taken over by another society in terms of its infrastructure, but in terms of its mind and its dreams and its myths, and its perception of reality" (qtd. in Hawley 32). Okri, like many magical realists, ultimately uses his novel as a means of resistance to Western epistemologies. Okri's novel is exemplary of a localized mode of magical realism, and Okri uses the license of magical realism to explore the interpenetration of the national and, especially, the international within the local. This thesis examines the ways in which centrifugal and centripetal movements within the text suggest the potential for neocolonialism, while at the same time speculating a liberated future. The thesis concludes with an acknowledgement of the paradoxes of extent within *The Famished Road*.

Chapter One: A Famished Road, a Full Tradition

With heady, visceral details and dizzying jumps in setting, deeply human characters and bizarre spirits, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* is more than reality. Okri's novel follows the life of a young boy nicknamed Azaro living with his mother and father in a harsh neighborhood which they call their "ghetto" (Okri 82). While Okri never explicitly names his location, *The Famished Road* ostensibly explores Lagos, Nigeria, the city of Okri's birth, on the eve of independence (Sasser 71). In the thirty years since its publication, Okri's novel has garnered attention in the field of postcolonial studies, and follows in the tradition of postcolonial magical realists.

The latter part of the twentieth century can be characterized by a worldwide movement, centered in Africa, toward independence of former colonies (Boehmer 182). This became the catalyst that sparked a parallel movement in literature that has taken on the overarching moniker of postcolonialism. Out of this circumstance and a need to relate a complex reality, the mode of magical realism was born. Magical realism is the paradoxical child of the paradoxical twentieth century. While the two terms sound mutually exclusive, for authors of magical realism, the magical aspects of the work do not negate the realist aspects (and vice versa), but rather the two create a composite that is more than strictly magical or strictly realist. The interaction between the real and the magical allows authors to navigate the complicated landscape of decolonization. Although magical realism is not tantamount to postcolonial fiction, the two coevolved, to the point that Sara Upstone remarks, "[I]n the last decade of the twentieth century, it was easy to be convinced, at least in some critical quarters, that magical realism *was* postcolonial fiction" (qtd. in Sasser 8). The connection between authors writing from and about former colonies and an

interest in magical realism is not a difficult conclusion to draw. Elleke Boehmer points this out, saying, “Drawing on the special effects of magical realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement” (235). Postcolonial magical realism not only allows authors to communicate their reality and tell stories, it is also an important tool of resistance to Western domination. This thesis will examine the ways in which one such postcolonial author, Ben Okri, uses a localized mode of postcolonial magical realism for both storytelling and resistance in an international environment.

This introduction aims to sketch a brief history of the genre of magical realism in order to establish more fully the connection between magical realism and postcolonialism. I then move on to identify a working definition of the genre that will aid in parsing Okri’s application of magical realism in *The Famished Road*. Okri’s particular application of magical realism is influenced by what Harry Garuba calls an “animist unconscious” that is part of a Yoruba cosmology (266). Finally, I examine two examples of prominent novels of magical realism, by Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, in order to point out the ways Okri follows the tradition of postcolonial magical realism, but then diverges from his predecessors in order to create a magical realist narrative that is concerned with the interpenetration of the national and, especially, the international within the local.

A Magical Realism Primer

Magical realism as a mode has developed over last century with myriad influences, but the prevalence magical realism enjoys today can be traced to Latin American authors writing in the mid-twentieth century, such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, Juan Rulfo, and Gabriel García

Márquez (Sasser 7). In his 1982 Nobel lecture, García Marquez speaks to necessity of creating a new genre, saying, “The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary” (“Solitude”). By creating this new mode of magical realism (or, as Alejandro Carpentier terms it, *lo real maravilloso Americano*, or “the marvelous American reality” [Slemon 407]), Márquez and his contemporaries were able to push against the architecture of the colonizer, creating a separate space somewhere between two worlds, yet surmounting both.

Perhaps because of its roots in marginalized colonized societies, early magical realist scholarship required Western empiricism and Christian thought to be at odds with indigenous myth and religion to create the magic/realist binary. While this is certainly true of some magical realist work, this line of thinking unnecessarily limits the mode. However, further study has revealed the friction between the magic and the real need not strictly derive from extratextual autochthonous resources (Sasser 17). This means that since the “Latin American boom” of the 50s and 60s, the genre has now expanded to include writers from myriad backgrounds who are members of formerly colonized peoples in formerly colonized lands. This includes authors from North America, the Caribbean, and Africa, as well as from groups such as women and those affected by diasporas. Magical realism then becomes means for postcolonial discourse, with the language able, as Stephen Slemon phrases it, to “provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity” (qtd. in Merivale 331).

Given the expansiveness of the term, including the diversity of authors and the number of ways in which magical realism functions, defining the mode has been no easy feat. Kim

Anderson Sasser synthesizes the history and criticism on the subject in order to craft a definition of the mode based on three trends she recognizes in the literature, summarized as

subversion, suspension, and summation: In the first, magic works to subvert realism and its representative worldview. In the second, magic and realism are suspended between each other disjunctively. In the third, magic functions summationally toward reality/realism: it adds to it. (Sasser 25)

Sasser's definition provides a structure for understanding the ways in which magical realism works without placing overly strict guidelines on what must remain, while recognizing the genre's capacity for innovation as, a mercurial mode. Sasser herself says, "[T]he mode's flexibility, due to the thinness of its formal features, furnished it with a range of functionality" (Sasser 15). The uniting feature between these three categories is an emulsion of the fantastic and the real that should lead to a narrative that supersedes but does not ignore reality and, in a postcolonial sense, acts as a dialectic between the signification of an "inherited language", or the dominating language of the colonizer, and a postcolonial reality (Slemon 411).

"Who Still Believe in Mysteries"

While magical realism is the term most prevalent in criticism, and therefore the primary term I will use throughout this thesis, it is important to note its alternatives. Magical realism as a literary term and lens for criticism has been critiqued for its reliance on its reader having a "rational" (Western) worldview to foment the magic/real binary (Sasser 23). Reading a work as "magical realist" often assumes an "Enlightened" reality against which magic is magical, or, in a word, other. According to critics, ascribing to this binary reinforces the dichotomy between the hegemonic colonizer and the primitive colonized. Because of this, Okri might be better suited to

what Harry Goruba calls *animist realism*, animism here being the understanding of an effervescent life within all things. Goruba explains: “This creed is made up of two basic tenets. One, that things possess a life of their own and, two, that when their souls are awakened their breath is freed and may migrate into other objects” (Goruba 272). While magical realism and animist realism are executionally similar, giving Okri the designation of animist realism acknowledges the paradigm (or “animist unconscious,” as Goruba terms it) from which Okri writes. In order for the mode to function, readers of magical realism are asked to believe in whatever magical element is incorporated, but animist realism presupposes familiarity with the paradigm. Acknowledgment of this inner life of all things is hinted at through the text, such as in Okri’s employment of personification: “The firewood cried out, popping and crackling” (Okri 207). In the context of Okri, bestowing the firewood with a human characteristic illustrates the animist inner life of objects. The positioning of this phrase during an episode in which Azaro encounters a spirit girl works to further emphasize the connection between Okri’s animist paradigm and the formal magical realist aspects of his prose. The most prominent, albeit complicated, example of the connection between animism and Okri’s magical realism is found in the motif of the road (which will be addressed at greater length in my conclusion). Throughout the novel, the road is characterized in a number of different ways--a means of coming and leave-taking, by turns revered and feared. Okri metaphorizes the road into the process of change, which again allows him to approach difficult ideas and encounter challenging realities. *The Famished Road* demonstrates an application of animist/magical realism as a means of postcolonial discourse.

Locating Okri’s Localization

Whether Okri remains in the field of magical realism, or is designated animist realist, he continues to inhabit the creative territory of postcolonial magical realists, which includes two giants of the scene, Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie. Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez published his seminal 1967 novel *Cien años de soledad*, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, during *el boom*, the explosion of Latin American magical realist literature. Salman Rushdie, the controversial British Indian author, contributed to the mode with his imaginative narration of Indian independence, *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981. Okri's novel, published in 1991, is indebted to both these prior works insofar as their authors helped to found the genre, helping both to define the new mode of writing as well as create the difficulties in doing just that. The two ubiquitous classics conjunctively create a foundation for postcolonial magical realism. Márquez and Rushdie engage with the mode of magical realism in different but related ways. By examining these engagements, I will show how Okri's work is both indebted to these foundational texts and divergent from them, thereby setting the stage for outlining the remainder of my thesis.

With a lengthy family tree that borders on Old Testament proportions, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is considered Márquez's *magnum opus*. The novel follows the Buendía family from the founding of their isolated village, Macondo, hidden deep in the jungle, to its destruction. The novel begins with the family's patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, taking his sons to see "the greatest invention of our time": ice (Márquez 18). Márquez disorders his universe, treating the everyday as fantastic while at the same time treating extraordinary occurrences glibly, such as when a single trail of blood from the murdered José Arcadio makes its way across town and into the house of his mother, Úrsula. Márquez's narrative voice finds nothing shocking

in this episode, relating the discovery of the body and its subsequent burial in staunch matter-of-fact tones. In this way, for the universe of the novel, magic effectively becomes real, and the magical aspects of the text must be read as realism. This corresponds to Sasser's first *modus operandus* of magical realism, that of magic's subversive power over realism (Sasser 25). The purpose of such subversion is a deconstruction of the Western "rational" framework and the colonial attitudes therein.

Considering the position of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the magical realist canon, it's only natural its influences should be felt across the genre. Certainly, *The Famished Road* is aware of its predecessor in Márquez. Harold Bloom says of Márquez, "My primary impression, in the act of rereading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is a kind of aesthetic battle fatigue, since every page is rammed full of life beyond the capacity of any single reader to absorb" (1). Okri's novel is likewise satiated with imagery and symbolism, with each page a dizzying smorgasbord for interpretation. Furthermore, Okri's formulation of an animist realist frame of narration begs a review of Márquez, who says in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "Things have a life of their own ... It's simply a matter of waking up their souls" (2). Finally, Okri mirrors Márquez's subversive quality of magical realism, although his mirroring is in the truest sense of the word: that is, a reversal. Whereas the subversive, fantastic aspect of magical realism in Márquez's writing is found within and around the protagonists of the novel, the Buendía family, Sasser argues that "[Okri] inverts the subversive formula in *The Famished Road* insofar as magic is identified with corrupt Nigerian politicians over and against the novel's humanist protagonists" (Sasser 28). Still, Okri's use of magical realism as a means of resistance places him within the same timeline as Márquez.

Another novel that owes a debt of influence to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* follows the course of Saleem Sinai's life as it runs parallel with the history of Indian independence--both Saleem and the Indian nation were born on at midnight on August 15, 1947. Saleem discovers that he and all other children born in the midnight hour on that day share a telepathic link, which Saleem uses to form the Midnight Children's Conference. The novel is framed as Saleem relating his life story in a Shandean fashion, and therefore features Saleem as both the main character as well as a vocal and assertive narrator and commentator. Rushdie's narrative strategy varies from the other two authors discussed here: "In magical realist works based on oral story-telling, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, although the reader perceives the flouting of realist conventions, the narrative itself betrays no awareness of incongruity" (Kortenaar 26). Still, like Márquez, Rushdie works to demonstrate the absurdity of an assigned Western "rationality".

Just as the presence of Márquez can be felt in both Rushdie and Okri, Rushdie feels a natural antecedent to Okri. Rushdie and Okri are both what Sasser calls Third World Cosmopolitans writing remotely (9), with Okri writing of Nigeria from London and Rushdie writing of India while based in the United States and United Kingdom. Postmodernism has been noted for its sharing formal features with magical realism (Sasser 13), and both Okri and Rushdie express attributes of postmodernism. Rushdie's prose is rich with intertextuality, and his narrative style swings widely within the novel, at times switching point-of-view or doing away with punctuation altogether. Although Okri's voice is very different from Rushdie's, his prose still includes stylistic innovations. For example, Okri's sense of time and space varies wildly throughout the text, with some moments stretching out while other are compressed: "It became

possible to sleep with eyes wide open... Time did not move at all" (Okri 269). The reader must also adjust as Azaro jumps into the spirit world with no warning, further demonstrating Okri's playing with space in the novel. These formal innovations, while stylistically unique, echo Rushdie's expression of the postcolonial experience.

Finally, a point that is of particular significance for launching my analysis: all three novels are set around the inauguration of independence--Rushdie's characters must deal with the consequences of Indian independence, Márquez's Colombia achieves independence midway through the novel, and Okri's "ghetto" waits as Nigerian independence looms. Taken together, the three novels represent a key trend of independence in postcolonial magical realism. In the "colonial state of bereavement," after communities have gained, it follows that all three novels attempt to "unearth communal memory" and construct a new, postcolonial identity, at the same time the magical realist aspect of the novels works to deconstruct the strict atmosphere of the Western epistemology (Boehmer 190). Rushdie uses the hybridity of magical realism to emphasize a hybrid nation-state in India, as well as its connections to Bangladesh and Pakistan. The multiplicity of voices of the *Midnight Children's* Conference represents the diversity of the nascent India. As for Márquez, the scope of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seems to encompass a wider Latin American identity, looking past arbitrary borders. Márquez is interested in distinguishing the Latin American "outsized reality" ("Solitude").

However, something different seems to be happening in *The Famished Road*. Whereas Márquez and Rushdie are concerned with a larger area--for Márquez a region and for Rushdie a country--Okri does not leave the bounds of the "ghetto," save for jumps into the spirit world. However, the boundaries of the "ghetto" are not impermeable. Okri's novel explores the fluidity

of belonging through the interpenetration of the national and international within the “ghetto.” While much postcolonial magical realism, including that of Rushdie and Márquez, functions as an “imagining a nation” (Boehmer 185), Okri tweaks this slightly, with his novel instead “redream[ing] this world” (Okri 498), the process for which he focalizes through the local.

From Here On Out

The “redreaming of the world”, or Okri’s exploration of the international within and without the local, is accomplished firstly by the incidence of members of the ghetto finding the means to escape its confines, as well his suggestion of the existence of a black international space. The first chapter of my thesis wonders at the power and limitation of representation in the formation of such a black international space through reading of Okri as an Afrofuturist.

My second chapter recognizes that the movement in and out of the communities in the novels is not unidirectional--in the same way Rushdie and Márquez include foreign influence and incursion, such as the American neighbors in *Midnight’s Children* and the multinational banana company in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Okri likewise includes the ingress of foreign influences into the “ghetto,” but his delineation between the local and the foreign is more complicated than his predecessors. Okri’s interest lies with the “presence of the elsewhere in the here”, as described by Achille Mbembe’s theory of Afropolitanism (Santana 1). Okri further denotes the transformative capacity of the community as outside influences enter but are changed, with the white man being reborn a Yoruba man and Madame Koto’s bar representing an alternative strategy of being under capitalism. However, in a community that teeters on the brink of independence, Okri maintains the presence of many possibilities: will this new country be liberated, or will neocolonialism become the new norm?

Finally, in my conclusion I note the ways Okri metaphorizes the process of this coming and going through the road. Okri's road is emblematic of this process as well as the consequences thereof. I conclude that Okri remains ambivalent across the novel, alluding to the nature of postcolonial experience through myriad unresolved paradoxes. Ultimately, the interpenetration of the local, national, and international within *The Famished Road* confronts questions of where and how we belong. In the end, we learn to "learn from them, but love the world" (Okri, p. 282).

Chapter Two: Between the Moon and Nigeria

Over the course of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, readers gain a multidimensional portrait of Azaro's "ghetto," isolated by poverty and circumscribed by progress. Readers can assume what Okri calls the "ghetto" to be a neighborhood of Lagos, Nigeria, on the eve of independence (Sasser 80). However, the narrative does not explore greater Lagos; instead the reader is primarily confined to the point of view of characters who remain in the community. Still, the novel is not completely insular--far from from it. While the reader remains in the "ghetto," Okri expands the universe of his novel through the application of different modes of going. I choose to focus on two examples of the way Okri accomplishes this centrifugal motion: Jeremiah the photographer and the characterization of the moon in the novel. Okri frames these movements using the elements of magical realism from my previous chapter. Such an application of magical realism localizes the novel, but also moves towards a global space through magical realism's capacity for resistance to supranational oppressive systems. Through such a reading of the examples of the moon and Jeremiah, Okri explores the liberatory, but limited, power of

representation. I conclude with the suggestion that an African futurist reading of Okri lends itself to the creation of a black international creative space.

Jeremiah's Magical Camera

The first, and more tangible, of these two examples of centrifugal movement is Jeremiah, a young man who begins his career as a photographer within the “ghetto,” but is able to publish his photographs in a national newspaper. Afterwards, he travels outside the bounds of the ghetto, taking photographs of the people he encounters. Both Jeremiah and the art he produces are thus able to leave the confines of the “ghetto,” but at a cost--Jeremiah is thereafter mostly forgotten by his community, as well as being targeted by the police. Jeremiah's tool is his camera, a piece of Western technology he has appropriated. While the flow of the global and, by extension, technology into Azaro's community will be the focus of the next chapter, this chapter centers on understanding the significance of the fact that Jeremiah uses technology to foster a black international creative space that extends beyond the community.

Although Okri never gives the community of the novel's setting a name, there is not a universality to the “ghetto”: it could not be *anywhere*. Rather, Okri localizes his setting again and again through the culture and behaviors of the people of the “ghetto,” reinforcing the inference that the “ghetto” is or is inspired by Lagos. Examples of this include a West African diet of foods such as peppersoup and eba, the wearing of agbada, as well as Dad's taste for ogororo and Madame Koto's palm wine business. Other cultural details come from Yoruba, an autochthonous religion of Nigeria and Benin, including the presence of Egunguns, or costumed practitioners of Yoruba; Madame Koto's fetish doll; and Okri's use of an *abiku* narrator, a Yoruba word for a child with a connection to the spirit world. Okri also accomplishes localization formally, through

his employment of the indigenous resource of Yoruba cosmology in his construction of an animist realist narrative. This animist paradigm, in which all things “possess a life of their own” (Garuba 272), is reflected in Okri’s magical realist prose and his metaphorization of objects and characters and the prevalence of the spirit world within the “ghetto.” While localization to this degree rules out universality, the detail involved nevertheless evokes a sense of empathy from the reader. In this way, Okri uses this hyperlocalization as a means of talking about the world.

The hyperlocalization of Okri’s “ghetto” is, I argue, paradoxically emphasized by contact with the international (and indeed the interplanetary). While most of the inhabitants of the “ghetto” lack the resources of opportunities to venture far from the neighborhood, Jeremiah the photographer is an important exception. Initially, Jeremiah captures portraits of the members of the families in his community, his glass display case for his photographs acting as their “first local newspaper” (Okri 142). In this way, the photographer joins in Okri’s celebration of the local. However, he seems unfulfilled--he is consumed by his own poverty, “his hunger and bitterness mak[ing] him ugly” (Okri 142). It isn’t until Jeremiah begins to eclipse the bounds of the ghetto that he becomes self-possessed once more, suggesting that he requires the context of the international to justify his identity as an artist. That identity is cemented when he gives himself the moniker of “International Photographer” (Okri 230). In the same scene in which Jeremiah introduces himself as the International Photographer, Azaro notices the inscriptions of his on his camera case: “TO BECOME A MAN” (Okri 230). Azaro cannot determine the meaning of this inscription, whether it be a direction, an invitation, or simply an unfinished thought. In any case, there is an implication that Jeremiah’s own maturity, and furthermore, his masculinity (to become a *man*) are tied to the maturation of his art. This maturation is

accomplished by the growing internationalization of his art as he moves further and further outside the boundaries of the “ghetto.” There is, however, the gendered implication that his ability to join the international community is related to his masculinity.

Jeremiah achieves his release from the “ghetto” expressly through his art in the form of photography. In the same way that postcolonial authors (Okri included) use magical realism as a means of resistance, reclaiming traditionally Western structures of prose and challenging Western paradigms (Sasser 27), so too does Jeremiah front a resistance to the political parties and the oppressive structure of the “ghetto.” Jeremiah adopts the Western technology of the camera, adapts it for his purposes, and then uses it to propel his agenda out of the community. Jeremiah documents the scandals and injustice of the politicians and the poor living conditions of the “ghetto.” His efforts not only empower him and his community--they give him powers. Jeremiah claims that he now has “magic” (Okri 232) that allows him to turn invisible and fly to the moon. His photographs also seem to have a levelling capacity, evidenced by his dealing with the rats in Azaro’s home. Okri associates rats with both poverty (Okri 78) and “bad politicians and imperialists and rich people” (Okri 233), but Jeremiah eradicates them all with his newfound “powerful medicine and ... secret charms” (Okri 233). For Jeremiah, the camera takes on even another dimension: when Azaro asks him where he has been and he replies “Hiding ... in my camera” (Okri 262), the camera becomes a sanctuary. Under Okri’s magical/animist realist structure, there is no doubt that Jeremiah physically entered his camera; here, Okri employs magical realism to underscore the liberatory as well as communicatory power of Jeremiah’s art, even as its gendered limitations are still acknowledged.

The power of Jeremiah's photography comes from its capacity as a tool of self-representation. Utilizing the technology of his camera, Jeremiah is able to take responsibility for his own story and that of his people, a right denied them by colonial systems for too long. On seeing the published photographs of the people of the "ghetto," Azaro declares, "For the first time in our lives we as a people had appeared in the newspapers. We were the heroes of our own drama, heroes of our own protest" (Okri 156). For the inhabitants of the "ghetto," the photographs seem to have a unifying effect, strengthening their ties "as a people," and this unity in turn creates empowerment: they are finally their own heroes. This sort of representation is not without caveats--Jeremiah's art is not only masculinist but also fundamentally two-dimensional, and therefore can't communicate the reality of the "ghetto" to its furthest extrapolation. And despite gaining representation, the plight of the "ghetto" and its inhabitants is not abated. Still, Okri's emphasis seems to be on the representational capability of art itself. This is evident when thugs break Jeremiah's camera and "the people who were inside the camera, who were waiting to become real... began wailing and wouldn't stop" (Okri 173). The implication here is that once the film inside the camera has been developed, becoming visible and therefore able to be shared, the people in the photographs become real. In this way, Okri connects the resistant capabilities of art with those of magical realism.

While Jeremiah's voyaging brings him power and empowerment, as established, it is not without consequences. The source of his power is also makes him a target to those in power: Azaro says, "We feared the photographer had been murdered. His glass cabinet remained permanently shattered... It became a small representation of what powerful forces in society can do if anyone speaks out against their corruptions" (Okri 182). In the same way that art can

positively become real, so too can its repercussions be felt physically. In the end, Jeremiah disappears from the “ghetto,” and readers do not learn if he simply left, became exiled from his homeland, or was caught by his enemies. Okri also highlights the possible effects leaving one’s community might have when Azaro forgets Jeremiah’s features and even his name, reducing him to a glass cabinet and a flashing camera. The only name I had for him was Photographer” (Okri 265). Jeremiah thus becomes the tool of his liberation (such as it is). In his treatment of Jeremiah and his camera, Okri acknowledges the complexities of belonging, the implications of representation, and that change it is able (or unable) to foment.

Jeremiah’s artistry suggests how Okri’s magical realism is closely tied to another aesthetic movement, one which has been defined by its centrifugal force and imagination. Jeremiah’s creative and transgressive use of technology corresponds to the aesthetic of African futurism (or Afrofuturism). African futurism is a genre of literature, film, and music that is concerned with the intersection of technology, the future, and the black international. Artists use common African futurist themes such as speculated futures, space and time travel, and mutations to craft a resistance to rigid Western ideologies (Eshun 466-7). An example of this can be found in the person of Sun Ra, an early Afrofuturist jazz composer and musician who explored harmony and discord in his music, blending mediums and musical genres. His music did more than cross genres--it also bled into the realm of philosophy (Szwed xviii). He created for himself a personal mythology, claiming to be from another planet and thereby commenting on the portrayal of African (or in this case, African Americans) as somehow alien (Szwed 85). Jeremiah, notable, flies to the moon to take pictures of its “beautiful face” (Okri 233). Okri tunes into this interplanetary aspect of African futurism with his characterization of the moon as a

place that *can* be “flown to” (Okri 164). For Okri, this moon is a potential space where black people, like Jeremiah, have the freedom to be creative. Okri ultimately uses these examples of outward movement, grounded in a magical realist narrative, to demonstrate a concern with the international as it is experienced by the local.

“Their Own Secret Moonlight”

While Jeremiah and his camera represent more tangible representations of centrifugal movement, I would argue Okri continues his development of a local and international black liberatory consciousness through his metaphorization of the moon as an African futurist creative space. Okri uses the existing associations of Jeremiah and his camera with the international to alert readers to the significance of the moon. Jeremiah proves this further through his documentation of black life around the world. Jeremiah shows Azaro a photograph a lynching that he says was taken both on “another continent” and “another planet” (Okri 263), alluding both to diaspora and the interplanetary. Okri further shows his concern with the black international through an association of the moon, within Yoruba, with Yemoja, a goddess of rivers (Lawal 46). The salience of rivers in the text, with the exposition of the novel being “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world” (Okri 3), connects Yemoja to Okri’s conception of the international. While in Yoruba homelands (that is, Nigeria and Benin), Yemoja is an important goddess of maternity, imperialism and the slave trade uprooted Yoruba practitioners and transported them and their beliefs to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. In these regions, people adapted the practice of Yoruba to fit a new reality and culture, and thus Yemoja has evolved a rich mythology, with different names and attributes (one such attribute being the moon) within

African diaspora communities worldwide--for example, Iemanjá in Brazilian Portuguese. This connection to the African diaspora shows Jeremiah's (and Okri's) concern with the black international.

Given this context, as well as his characterization of the moon as an otherworldly place, Okri's moon can, like Jeremiah, be read in terms of an African futurist discourse and strengthens the case for reading *The Famished Road* as an African futurist magical realist novel. While the etymology of the word "Afrofuturism" places the movement in 1993 America, a year later and a continent away from the publication of *The Famished Road*, Samatar argues for a definition of African futurism that would expand its scope to encompass a greater territory of both time and space, "unrestricted by a North American origin story" (187). Samatar points out the influences and roots of African futurism that stretch into the 70s and 80s and even earlier, as well as the clearly futurist works that have emerged from across the African continent (187). Even with Samatar's expansions of African futurism past its date and place of origin, Okri's novel may not initially strike a reader as a member of a group of primarily science fiction works. And to be fair, Okri may not be a perfect fit for African futurism: as Samatar points out, African futurism is predicated on change and catalyst, whereas in *The Famished Road* "the emphasis is not on change, but on the cycle of a child's death and rebirth as a figure for the postcolonial interregnum" (Samatar 183). Still, although the change that occurs in *The Famished Road* is more understated, it is present nevertheless, particularly through stories and art. In such a light, it is possible to read distinctly African futurist themes into Okri's novel.

Furthermore, while the novel is filled with the "winds of recurrence" (Okri 188), as the novel is premised on the cyclicity of the journey of the *abiku* narrator between the "ghetto" and

the spirit world, the novel still looks unmistakably to the future. The trajectory of the novel moves in the direction of independence and the future of the “ghetto.” The prevalence of destiny in the novel--“Our destiny will protect us” (Okri 228) and “the battle for our destiny” (Okri 496), for example--shows the ways in which the characters too look forward with a “future-oriented mysticism” (Samatar 184). At the same time, Okri does not ignore the “mythic past” (Samatar 184). Azaro claims that his knowledge of how to fly to the moon was passed down to him from his mother (Okri 164), suggesting the repossession of history espoused by African futurism.

Okri’s association of the moon with the black international reflects another of these African futurist themes: that of outer space. As Sun Ra’s album titles proclaims, “Space is the Place”--the place for black people (Samatar 182). As Ytasha Womack says,

Whether it’s outer space, the cosmos, virtual space, or physical space, there’s this often-understated agreement that to think freely and creatively, particularly as a black person, one has to not just create a work of art, but literally and figuratively create the space to think it up in the first place (qtd. in Samatar 186).

Okri participates in this designation of space as an other, freer place though his characterization of the moon. In the crowded “ghetto,” outer space represents just that--space. The moon becomes a space specifically for black people when Mum says, “When white people first came to our land... we had already gone to the moon” (Okri 282). There is a sense in the text that the moon is an alternate location, somewhere far away. However, Okri reflects the instantaneousness of time travel, a common feature in African futurism, in the process of reaching the moon as Azaro says, ““We are now on the moon”” immediately after being “somewhere else” (Okri 315). The addition of the word “now” grounds the statement in the present and indicates Azaro’s certainty

of having been elsewhere. This incident follows immediately after Azaro sees a flash of light like a camera (Okri 315), recentering the association of the moon on the intersection of art and technology.

Okri reinforces the community aspect of the moon as an international space by his method of reaching the moon. In the novel's prophetic conclusion, it is said that "[w]e could no longer fly to the moon" (Okri 496, emphasis added), with the "we" corresponding to Azaro's community and, in a larger sense, the black international. This ability to fly to the moon is not innate, but it can be learned, or at least taught. Azaro identifies two teachers for this: his mother and Jeremiah the photographer. The two teachers have their own implications--Mum represents the importance of reclaiming history for African futurist fiction, which for Jeremiah has connotations with the transporting power of art. However, Okri never leaves things simple. We never see Mum teaching Azaro, or the two of them going to the moon together, and we can therefore only rely on Azaro's word that it happened. As for Jeremiah, his instructions to Azaro are too vague and Azaro does not reach the moon. Through these examples, Okri hints at the obstacles to arriving at and the subjectiveness of the moon as a black international space.

The Famished Road is persistent in its paradoxical quality. From the unlikely unity of magic and reality to the nearly indistinguishable Party of the Rich and Party of the Poor, Okri maintains a certain level of equivocation. This is true of Okri's portrayal of the centrifugal forces in the novel, as well. While Jeremiah is able to use his art for self-representation, and as a means to move into an international sphere, there are limits to its efficacy. Jeremiah himself also faces repercussions for his egress from his community. The moon, on the other hand, seems to be a place of refuge, a place for freedom and discourse, as when a seeming multiplicity of voices

speak prophetically to Azaro from the moon. According to these voices, there are many moons. While Azaro is looking for the “moon of Independence” (Okri 167), there are other possibilities. Okri frequently associates the moon with imagery of a “deep unmoving whiteness” throughout the novel (Okri 168). This raises the question--is the moon truly a white space in the sense of a blank slate, whereupon can be written a black international history? Or is this white space, at least insofar as it is defined in terms of national independence, already occupied, a neocolonial prospect? In the same way that Okri ends his novel before Madame Koto gives birth, independence is achieved, and readers learn the future of Nigeria, on this point Okri is silent.

Chapter Three: “The Elsewhere in the Here”

My last chapter focused on the centrifugal movements Okri’s makes in *The Famished Road*, specifically those of Jeremiah the photographer and the moon. My reading of these two examples of outward movement is influenced by the cultural aesthetic of African futurism and its capacity to use elements of science fiction (technology and outer space, for example) to describe a way of being African as well as to suggest possibilities for African empowerment. The examples of Jeremiah and the moon correspond to the way African futurism is concerned with the black international, reclaiming the past and anticipating a future through the liberatory capacities of art.

This chapter turns from the centrifugal to the centripetal by thinking with a critical framework closely associated with African futurism. Sofia Samatar, for example, connects the expansiveness of the landscape envisioned by African futurism with Afropolitanism by quoting Simon Gikandi as saying, “Like Afrofuturism, Afropolitanism... creates[s]... ‘a new

phenomenology of Africanness--a way of being African in the world” (Samatar 186).

Afropolitanism as a field of aesthetic inquiry finds its origin in a 2005 essay by Taiye Selasi entitled “Bye-Bye Babar,” in which she defines Afropolitans as the newest members of diaspora, but this time as African young professionals residing in capitals of the world, “coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you” (Santana 1). This educated, well-traveled demographic experiences a sort of cultural hybridity, being “of Africa and of other worlds at the same time” (Samatar 186). As a graduate of a prestigious university living and writing in London, Nigerian Okri could easily fit within this category. Likewise, as Jeremiah the photographer enters the international creative space (that might be metaphorized as the moon), he too becomes an Afropolitan moving outward into the world.

While the above understanding of Afropolitanism corresponds effectively to centrifugal forces within *The Famished Road*, Achille Mbembe offers an alternative definition to Selasi’s conception of Afropolitanism that lends the aesthetic a centripetal quality. Mbembe’s Afropolitanism “moves beyond ‘the fetishization of origins’ and the relationship between the self and the world to the more significant problems of ‘self-explication’ and the ‘after-life’” (Bosch Santana 2). Importantly (for the purposes of this chapter), Mbembe’s Afropolitanism is less concerned with the dispersion of Africa throughout the world as it is with the confluence of cultures within Africa, or what he calls the “elsewhere in the here” (qtd. in Bosch Santana 1). Okri provides examples of this “elsewhere” coming into the ghetto in a number of ways, from representing clearly foreign people to less overt foreign ideologies. In this chapter, I will focus on the way Okri explores the relationship between these foreign figures and the “ghetto” they enter. I choose two examples to frame this relationship: that of the white man Mum encounters in

the marketplace, as well as that of Madame Koto and her adoption of Western ideologies and technology. Using the magical realist framework of *The Famished Road*, Okri uses these figures to illustrate the “elsewhere in the here,” as well as to explore the transformative quality of the “ghetto.”

My reading of magical realism thus far has largely subscribed to the popular movement in magical realist criticism that focuses on the mode (as a facet of postcolonialism) and its deconstructive capacity, in that it dismantles Eurocentric and imperial epistemologies (Helgesson 484). This can certainly be felt in Okri: a Western empirical (as well as imperial) worldview dissolves in the effervescent substance of Okri’s “animist unconscious” (Garuba 266). However, there seems to be more at play here: Sasser pushes against such a straightforward reading of magical realism and the way it is “so often automatically seen to deconstruct notions of subjectivity, history, nationhood, reality, without any sense of how it can also construct these notions” (Sasser 27). Mbembe offers a possibility of construction when he uses the phrase “interweaving of worlds” to describe this process of cultural exchange on the African continent. Okri exhibits this interweaving of worlds formally through the magical realist architecture of the novel, as Azaro inhabits both the spirit world and the mortal world simultaneously. This wording suggests a maintained integrity, as two self-contained realities in the form of worlds are “woven” together--an essentially creative action. Therefore, both constructive and deconstructive operations can be discerned in *The Famished Road*, particularly in Okri’s centripetal movements.

The White/Yoruba Man and the Implications of Transformation

The first example of these centripetal movement is found in the figure of the white/Yoruba man, whom Okri uses both as a metonym for colonialism as well as a means to

explore the transformative power of the Afropolitan “ghetto.” Mum encounters this man in the marketplace while selling her wares. At first, he is a white man who asks Mum to tell him “how to get out of Africa” (Okri 482). Two weeks later, although the man claims it has been five hundred years, Mum meets him again, although this time, “His face and nose and everything was exactly the same except that now he was a Yoruba man with fine marks on his face” (Okri 483). This compression of time, combined with the white man’s experience in Africa, can be read as a history of British colonization in Nigeria. After the man returns to England, he tells Mum he joined the Secret Service. This looks forward to a Cold War world and preludes post-Independence Nigeria.

The episode of Mum’s conversations with the white man demonstrates Mbembe’s Afropolitan concept of the “elsewhere in the here” in practice. Mum says that “there are many roads into Africa” (Okri 482), and the presence of the white man in the “ghetto” is a concrete example of the roads being taken. The man asks Mum to tell him how to get out of Africa, but he determines, “The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you.” This suggests a ubiquity of Africanness, although one that is perhaps not positive, at least in the man’s eyes. Later, however, he changes his verdict: “The only way to get out of Africa [is] to become an African” (Okri 483). The white man’s ordeal in the “ghetto” introduces another dimension to Okri’s Afropolitanism--the transformative capacity of the “ghetto.” While other worlds and cultures may enter, they are altered in the kettle of the “ghetto.” This is not to be read as a “melting pot,” which hints at homogeneity. Instead, Mbembe’s “interweaving of worlds” allows, to some degree at least, both cultures to maintain their integrity: the man is both white and

Yoruba. Yet he is also different as each. Not only is the man's mind changed--his appearance is changed as well.

At the same time, there is an insinuation of an enduring neocolonial and neoliberal order. Although the white man now appears Yoruba, Mum still recognizes him to be the man she met two weeks and five hundred years ago after she "turn[s] and twist[s] her mind around" (Okri 483). Even though the white man has been reborn as a Yoruba man, he still retains that proximity to whiteness. This again echoes post-Independence Nigeria: while leadership may now have a black face, the underlying neocolonial system is not so easily shaken. Here Okri underlines a potential pitfall of an interconnected, Afropolitan community: Elleke Boehmer notes that "[i]n much of the decolonized world, decolonization in fact produced few changes: power hierarchies were maintained, and the values of the former colonizer remain influential" (Boehmer 237). The independent nation is not so easily extricated from the legacy of colonialism. Boehmer goes on to explain how this translates into the genre of magical realism:

[t]he genre itself represents the take-over of a colonial style. By mingling the bizarre and the plausible so that they become indistinguishable, postcolonial writers mimic the colonial explorer's reliance on fantasy and exaggeration to describe new worlds (242).

Okri uses the character of the white man to recognize the lingering effects of colonization on language and culture, even in an independent nation, state, or community, and even when the space of the local has some power to ensure the production of difference.

Thus, even as this episode acknowledges the neocolonial potential of centripetal movement, painting independence with a skeptical brush, at the same time Okri's narrative strives to deconstruct restrictive systems of Western thought. Okri counters this neocolonial

potential with magical realism's decolonizing potential (Faris 134). Firstly, Okri denotes the relativity of time in the figure of the white/Yoruba man, who says, "Time is not what you think it is" (Okri 484). Within Okri's magical/animist realist narrative, five hundred years is able to pass in two weeks. Space, too, becomes relative as the man boards a plane that "went round the world" but ended up "in the same place" (Okri 483). Africa and Azaro's community become an inexplicable magnet for the man. Furthermore, Wendy Faris points out that "[m]agical realism reorients not only our habits of time and space but our sense of identity as well" (25). The man's identity shifts across the section, from a government official to a madman to a Yoruba businessman. Here, Okri deconstructs another prevalent narrative by giving the colonizer (the white man) a shifting identity, rather than the colonized (Mum). Finally, the episode reflects a postmodern refusal to be straightforward as Mum tells her story in a roundabout manner, ignoring questions posed by both Azaro and the white man. With the two fields sharing a goal of eroding Western claims to an exclusive rationality, the link between postmodernism and postcolonial magical realism is summarized by Boehmer in the claim that both are concerned with "marginality, ambiguity, disintegrating binaries" (244).

What is more, while Mum's encounter with the man has been shown to be deconstructive, Okri also taps into magical realism's constructive capacity. While, as I have said, the presence of the white man in the marketplace and his transformation is signatory of persistent neocolonialism, the episode of Mum's encounter with the man is notable in that she is telling it to Azaro and Ade, another *abiku* child. This act of telling is constitutive of Mbembe's Afropolitanism, specifically of what he calls "self-explication," which echoes the discussion of

the decolonial imperative of self-representation in my last chapter. Boehmer grounds this self-representation historically, noting in the case of India:

Jawaharlal Nehru heralded the moment [of India's Independence Day] as historical and rare, and earth-changing move from an old world into a new 'when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance'. This demand for utterance, for self-representation and self-respect, was spoken with increasing urgency (181).

Because Mum tells the story herself, she, like Jeremiah in the previous chapter, claims authority of the narrative and is able to express her own animist unconscious through the telling. While Okri does not deny there remain symptoms of colonialism in Azaro's neighborhood, he uses his authorial power to work towards negating these within the universe of the novel.

Madame Koto and the Ingress of Progress

While Okri's portrayal of the episode of Mum and the man in the marketplace is ultimately ambivalent, as it reaches multiple antithetical conclusions, Okri pushes this even further in the fundamentally ambivalent character of Madame Koto and her bar. Madame Koto is by turns benevolent and dangerous, generous and self-serving. By the novel's conclusion, she is pregnant with the "abiku trinity" (Okri 494), which serves as an allegory for Nigeria after independence (Sasser 98). Likewise, Madame Koto, in the same way as the white/Yoruba man, is representative of Okri's ambivalence towards centripetal movements in the text. Madame Koto's bar seems to be a point of confluence between the community and the outside. Azaro frequently remarks on the perceived "total strangers" in the bar (Okri 133). The strangeness or foreignness of the bar's clients is emphasized by their post-human features: through Azaro's observations, Okri exaggerates the difference between Azaro's community and the newcomers.

At the same time, Madame Koto's bar serves to further localize the setting of the novel as a fixture of the community, serving regional foods and practicing Yoruba customs, such as Madame Koto's "fetish" (Okri 136). The bar then becomes a space for the comingling of the foreign and the local, with Azaro noting, "And amongst these strange people were others who seemed normal, who had stopped off on the way home from their jobs for an evening's drink" (Okri 133). This intertwining of local and extra-local in the space of the bar results in a greater sensitivity to the "presence of the elsewhere"--indeed the everywhere--in the here.

Along with perceived foreigners entering the bar comes foreign ideologies. A relentless capitalist economy enters the "ghetto" through Madame Koto's bar, suggested by details such as the Coca-cola calendar in the bar. Over the course of the novel, Madame Koto strives to improve her business, earning more profit as she does so. The example of Madame Koto's bar furthermore demonstrates the unevenness of development that accompanies capitalist "progress", as Madame Koto is the only person in the neighborhood with the "distinction of electricity" (Okri 373). The electricity, moreover, comes at a steep price: one of Madame Koto's "prostitutes" is killed by electrocution (Okri 484). This attribution of violence to modernity is manifested in Madame Koto's car. While it is "certainly news" that Madame Koto buys herself a car, she does not have full control of it, leading to a horrific crash:

[T]he car smashed into the cement platform, into the wall of the compound, and its lights went dead... The men managed to wrench open the mangled car door and bring out the twisted form of the driver. He had blood all over him (Okri 421).

The trauma of this event reflects the anxiety of change salient throughout the text. The car is a source of prestige, but also has the potential to be characterized as violent, even traumatic, neocolonialism.

However, in the same way that the white man is transformed upon entering the community, so too does capitalism undergo a shift. Alexander Fyfe suggests that *The Famished Road*'s animist realism generates the potential for alternative ways of being under capitalism, that is, "efforts to generate *wealth* outside of capitalist processes of production and accumulation" (6). Dad calls this type of wealth "power", and notes the negative effects of capitalism in his society when he says, "We are forgetting these powers. Now, all the power that people have is selfishness, money, and politics" (Okri 70). However, we see Madame Koto developing her own method of living under, but still subverting, capitalism when she uses her profits to nurture the community, providing jobs to women and helping Azaro's family financially. Okri even connects Madame Koto's car to my previous discussion of African futurism by saying the car, like Azaro, can "drive even to the moon" (Okri 380). There is an implication here that the car, and capitalist modernity in a larger sense, is driving the future, if you will. While this form of technology maintains its connection to neocolonialism as a consequence of its origin, again producing a potential drawback of an interconnected Afropolitan community, it still has the potential to help achieve the liberatory space sought by African futurism and nascent in the self-explicatory power of Afropolitanism.

Chapter Four: The Open Road

Across *The Famished Road*, Okri does not feel compelled to pass clear judgments or set clear-cut distinctions. Instead, the novel is studded with myriad paradoxes and contradictions. Okri's young protagonist himself is characterized as a contradiction, and he says "I prayed for laughter, a life without hunger. I was answered with paradoxes" (Okri 6). Azaro, the protagonist, is an *abiku* child, a Nigerian trope that "refers to a child in an unending cycle of births, deaths, and re-births" (Quayson 122), a testament to the "heartrending deaths of countless newborns throughout the region's history" (Hawley 30). As an *abiku*, Azaro vacillates between the spirit world and the mortal world, sometimes within the space of a single paragraph. In this way, Okri encapsulates the element of paradox extent throughout the text within Azaro's "paradoxical soul" as he inhabits both the country of life and death (Okri 326). Okri's use of an *abiku* narrator contributes to his structuring *The Famished Road* as a work of animist realism, which functions within a greater tradition of postcolonial magical realism.

At first glance, the two terms "magic" and "realism" seem to be irreconcilable, but Okri layers his the two in such a way the product is something more than reality. Instead of these paradoxes functioning as riddles the reader must solve, they instead reflect the inherently paradoxical state of the postcolonial society. "For the *abiku*, one's *personal* vision is a shared possession of the community, and one's *idea* of self is a result of the interchange" (Hawley 35). The interchange between the two world--that of the "ghetto" and that of the outside world--can likewise help inform the identity of the community, as at once distinct yet within the sphere of global society. Over the course of this thesis, I point out the ways Okri emphasizes Mbembe's notion of the "elsewhere in the here" and vice versa through the interpenetration of the local, national, and international. This boundary-crossing movement occurs in both directions, inward

and outward, and demonstrates the permeability and mutability of said boundaries. Still, Okri maintains his singular ambivalence in the content of his novel.

In the first chapter, I discuss the ways in which Okri represents the outward, or centrifugal, movement of people and ideas going from the “ghetto.” An example of this is Jeremiah the photographer and his camera. Jeremiah appropriates the Western technology of the camera to capture the truth of his neighborhood. This allows him to represent his native community through the publication of his photographs. It further allows him to escape the “ghetto” and explore the world, chronicling the diaspora he encounters. Okri connects Jeremiah’s interest in the black international with the revelatory power of art through the characterization of the moon. The moon is described as a separate place, one that must be flown to: “I can teach you how to fly to the moon” (Okri 233). The moon thus corresponds to the African futurist depiction of space (and the moon) as a free, creative space for the black international. It becomes a potential future, bright with the “spirit of Independence” (Okri 167).

However, these examples do not come without caveats. Okri does not dismiss the limitations of representation for Jeremiah’s artwork, as it is necessarily two-dimensional and therefore can never provide a truly complete description of his community. Furthermore, by using his art to expose the corruption and violence of the powers that be, Jeremiah incurs punishment, imprisonment, and eventually exile. The moon likewise bears an ambivalence in its portrayal. Okri pairs the moon again and again with imagery of white and whiteness, suggesting a possible future represented by the moon may be one of neocolonialism. Still, there is a suggestion of a revolutionary black inhabitation of white space.

The second chapter moves on to Okri's inclusion of inward flows in the novel. I frame my argument using Achille Mbembe's definition of Afropolitanism, that is, the recognition of an African continent or community as a confluence of culture and influence, summarized as a "concern for the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa" (Bosch Santana 1). The discussion of centripetal motion in *The Famished Road* shows the ways that Okri's novel can be *both* critical of modernity as neocolonial *and* interested in modernity's creative, even liberatory potential. I outline two strategies Okri uses to characterize centripetal movement, using the examples of the white man who is reborn as a Yoruba man and Madame Koto and her bar. The white/Yoruba man is representative of a history of British colonialism in Nigeria, as well as a potentially neocolonial trajectory after independence. However, there is another perspective as this example demonstrates the transformative capacity of Okri's Afropolitan community and its potential for deconstructing binaries such as "local" and "foreign". This deconstructive action is repeated in Madame Koto's bar, as the bar becomes an analogue for Mbembe's "interweaving of worlds," representing both influences from inside the community and outside. With outside influence come ideologies such as capitalism and, with it, technology. Okri seems to make the suggestion that Madame Koto's adoption and adaption of capitalism and technology are a move towards the future. Still Okri nuances his characterization, associating the two with violence and once again asserting the possibility of neocolonialism.

I conclude this thesis by noting that these two types of movement share a common feature--the location of the process of coming and going. The inside world of the ghetto and the outer world of the globe are connected, both literally and figuratively, by the road. From the very title, readers are alerted to importance of the road in Okri's novel. In classic Okri fashion, the

road is ambivalently characterized. It is at once mystical-- “[t]he river became a road and the road branched over the whole world” (Okri 3)--and ordinary--“the filthy untarred road” (Okri 486). Okri’s portrayal hungry (some might say famished) road, demanding sacrifices, shows the consequences of traveling down this road, the danger and the sense loss that comes with leaving. At the same time, there is something humanist about the road: “All human beings travel the same road” (Okri 70). These warring characterizations paint the road as an enigma, a paradox in and of itself, encapsulating the thread of ambivalence that runs as an undercurrent throughout the text and reflecting Okri’s interest in the postcolonial experience as paradox.

While it may seem that these dilemmas of understanding, in terms of how to parse the paradoxes of the road, are insurmountable, Okri also says, “From a certain point of view the universe seems to be composed of paradoxes. But everything resolves. That is the function of contradiction” (Okri 327). In *The Famished Road*, Okri has given his reader a universe of paradoxes, to be sure. In the same way that the novel ends before independence is fully achieved, so too does Okri leave the reader unfulfilled--his ambivalence persists. Even the conclusion of the novel is uncertain--the mood is hopeful, but Okri undercuts that optimism when he says, “[T]he good breeze hadn’t lasted forever” (Okri 500). However, while cyclicity is a major theme in the novel, the novel’s trajectory is unmistakably towards the future--towards a resolution, whether that resolution be positive or otherwise. In the conclusion to *The Famished Road*, Okri says “Our road must be open. A road that is open is never hungry” (Okri 497). There is an implication here that by keeping these avenues of movement and exchange viable, by remaining true to Mbembe’s Afropolitanism, the road will not be hungry. Azaro’s community will be able to define itself in terms both the local and the global. The sacrifice of exchange,

interrelation, and egress will be satisfied. And, perhaps, the paradox of the road will be resolved. But of course, Okri withdraws his certainty, and the novel ends mystifyingly once more: “A dream can be the highest point of a life” (Okri 500).

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